***Why acceptance of growth mindset ideas requires the adoption of growth mindset practices***

There have been warnings from [Carol Dweck](https://www.tes.com/news/school-news/breaking-news/carol-dweck-whole-idea-growth-mindset-say-yes-they-can) and now from Jo Boaler that some teachers and schools are adopting an approach to the theory of growth mindset development that is problematic.

Firstly, simplistic profiling is being used to categorise students as having a growth or fixed mindset. Those who appear to have the latter are then told that it’s this that is holding them back and they need to change, “Here, take away this leaflet and stick it in your planner. Follow the 5 steps when you’re faced with a challenge or difficult homework and you’ll see how your mindset changes!” But this intervention, inadequate in itself, is also accompanied by few changes in teaching methods and even less overall revision to curriculum planning and delivery.

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“It is always more easy to discover and proclaim general principles than to apply them.”

Winston Churchill

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Secondly, even when there is an attempt to change teaching techniques (have you seen the glossy new posters in the staff room?), these are often superficial: praise the work and effort shown, not the person’s talent or natural skill; frequently tell the class how you welcome mistakes – these lead to learning; ensure you set challenging tasks for all students, not just the most able; reward effort not just the quality of the finished work. Some schools move beyond this but often don’t have the vision or know-how to do more. [Jo Boaler says](https://www.tes.com/news/tes-magazine/tes-magazine/we-need-a-revolution-how-we-think-about-maths):

“You cannot just give a mindset intervention to kids and say ‘OK you have a growth mindset now’ and then give them the same teaching. It is not saying children need a different mindset. It’s saying let’s give children a different mindset by teaching in a different way.”

***Formative assessment & policy***

The situation reminds me of the way the original research on formative assessment led by Prof Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam was misappropriated by policy makers to mean more testing and assessment feedback during the year to ensure every child is frequently told what level they are working at and what they can do to get to the next level. Sound familiar? The trouble is the research which led to the formative assessment ‘revolution’ was actually more about the negative effect of showing students their grades or levels when providing feedback than it was about whether students know their current grade. When any form of summative indicator is used in feedback it inhibits students’ reflective engagement about what they’ve done and how it could be improved [1]. How many schools I wonder have a no grade or score on class assessment or homework assignment feedback?

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“He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.”

Leonardo da Vinci   
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But what is very interesting is that Prof Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam had also identified the relationship between assessment and feedback practices and growth mindset before the term had entered common educational discourse. They wrote back in 1998 [2]:

Where the classroom culture focuses on rewards, ‘gold stars’, grades or place-in-the-class ranking, then pupils look for the ways to obtain the best marks rather than at the needs of their learning which these marks ought to reflect. One reported consequence is that where they have any choice, **pupils avoid difficult tasks**. They also spend time and energy looking for clues to the ‘right answer’. **Many are reluctant to ask questions out of fear of failure**. Pupils who encounter difficulties and poor results are led to **believe that they lack ability**, and this belief leads them to attribute their difficulties to a defect in themselves about which they cannot do a great deal. So they ‘retire hurt’, **avoid investing effort in learning** which could only lead to disappointment, and try to build up their self-esteem in other ways.

The cultures within schools and classrooms are created by values and practices. Sometimes there are serious discrepancies between the two and the learning cultures created are less than authentic. [Teachers’ own understanding about themselves as learners](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-help-teachers-become-inspiring-nigel-newton), their perception of their students and expectations about their potential, all influence their daily interactions with students and management of learning opportunities. Often their beliefs and perceptions are not openly discussed. Even when an effort is made by a school to embrace positive educational theories, teachers appear unmoved. This is often because those theories are not incorporated into the overall management of school, for example, how teachers’ performance is assessed with lesson observation grades and attainment targets for their classes is often particularly lacking in formative vision!

We’d do well to remember that **teaching and learning are highly complex, context-dependent activities**. As we can see above, the valuable insights about learning emerging from fields of neuroscience, educational assessment and learning psychology are often intertwined. It takes time and thought to see this and make the most of it. **Both students and teachers need to have an understanding of learning which they can share and a language to communicate this.** Buying in new techniques, one-off sharp styled INSETs, may produce an initial buzz but integrating really empowering learning change takes more than twinkle and whizz. It can be done and doesn’t need to be costly. But it takes a bit more than following fads [3].